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ABSTRACT

High school students should be given the opportunity to do improvised duet acting, and criteria for evaluation of performances of improvised duet acting should be established. Although planning and prepared work should be discouraged as much as possible, because of the time limitations for the performance, it is good for the performers to know where they are going. In other words, they should know before performing what point "A" (the conflict), point "B" (the climax), and point "C" (the resolution) will be. Pre-determination of the elements of the dramatic action can work very effectively in the improvised duet. Scene dynamics require that actors stick to the point, and the integrity of a scene is its adherence to its own internal logic. Scene dynamics and scene integrity should be the principal considerations in evaluating the performance. However, the more subtle aspects of the performance should also be considered: the development of information, the pantomime skills, and the balance between performers. (Basic references on improvisation are listed and specific recommendations are made.) (LL)

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Preparing for Improvised Duet Acting

Arthur L. Dirks*

Kansas high school speech and drama programs have now had one year of experience with the improvised duet acting event at state speech and drama festivals. This relatively new event in high school speech programs has enjoyed even greater success at the state festivals than it did at invitational competitions in previous years if performance skill and student interest and enthusiasm are any measure. In judging events during the 1975 festivals, however, I detected what appeared to be a lack of confidence or even haphazardness in the approach to preparation by many performers. While I have no intention of "talking down" to those coaches and judges who have good backgrounds in improvisation, the purpose of this paper is to suggest a viable approach to preparation and, at the same time, to present for coaches and judges criteria for evaluation of performances.

The history of dramatic improvisation is probably as old as conscious theatre, if we can accept the fact that the legendary Thespis improvised his separation from the chorus. The early Renaissance theatre owes much of its development to improvisation, and Roman traditions were carried into the new age through Commedia dell' Arte. Stanislavsky used improvisation as a rehearsal technique, the Becks used it to develop scripts, and Paul Sills used it to develop the performance itself. Throughout the history of improvisation, we find it being used both as an end in itself and as a means to an end.

When improvisation is used as a means to an end, the focus of the work is on that which is being developed, not on the techniques of improvisation itself. Stanislavsky and many other prominent directors have endorsed the use of improvisation in rehearsals for a production. Once an actor has a reasonable grasp of his character, that character can be intensified and rounded out by placing him in circumstances other than those given in the script. The actor must then rely upon his grasp of

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His speeches sometimes go to as many as a dozen drafts and a "clearance form" is sent off to a checklist of as many as 15 key administration aides.

Ford's "input is much larger than most people believe," says Hartmann, one of the President's closest aides.

"We consider ourselves a reflection of policy . . . in the final analysis they're his speeches," says Paul A. Theis, an ex-newspaperman who hands out the White House speechwriting assignments.

It takes a White House Editorial Office staff of 40, including the speechwriters, to keep up with the voluminous output of presidential speeches, legislative messages, dinner toasts, proclamations, statements and greetings.

Ford often makes three or four speeches a week. He loves to drop in on parties and gatherings of Republicans and these last-minute decisions give the speechwriters harried moments.

So far, in eight months of office, Ford has made about 200 speeches.

The role of his speechwriters is likely to become increasingly important as Ford gears up around mid-summer for the 1976 presidential campaign.

Hartmann, a close intimate of Ford, supervises the speechwriting effort.

He wrote the historic first speech when Ford took office after Nixon's resignation. Since then Hartmann has cut down on his speechwriting. But he often does the final rewrite on important pronouncements.

In addition, Ford's speechwriting team of professionals includes six men and one woman, whom they claim is a first for the White House.

. . . . . .

his character to meet the new circumstances, thereby adding new dimensions to his portrayal. Improvisation is also used in developing a script. Some of the early, pre-exile work of the Living Theatre, and much of the later work by Joseph Chaikin in his Open Theatre used this approach. Once the script is developed through a variety of improvisational techniques, the event is essentially set and the amount of improvisation during the performance itself is limited. Other groups, notably the Performance Group, vary in the degree to which they employ improvisation during the actual performance.

The use of improvisation during the performance represents its employment as an end. The Commedia dell' Arte is an example in which stock "bits," or "lazzi" were lengthened or shortened, rearranged, re-combined, and interchanged according to the whims of the performers, and the general order of events listed in the abbreviated scenario. Other examples, largely oral, are such improvisational groups as The Committee, The Premise, and Second City, where many of television's comic writers were spawned. The forte of these groups is spontaneous improvisation on random suggestions supplied by the audience. Of course when audience requests are repeated, performers develop stock "bits" they can use each time the opportunity arises.

The distinction between improvisation as an end and as a means becomes a little blurred in discussing the new festival event. Since the performance is expected to be improvised, it is clearly improvisation as an end, yet it may be argued that greater educational benefits are possible if one also approaches improvisation as a means. For example, if the entire focus is upon the performance itself the event could easily turn into a Commedia performance. After drawing a topic the performers might devise a scenario for stock characters that would permit maximum use of prepared "lazzi" and proven gags. The rules of the event do not preclude such an approach, and if the two performers are reasonably imaginative and work well together the success of the scene is fairly certain. Certainly, there are educational benefits to such an approach, but not as many as can be realized if the performers create new characters, generate new dialogue, and deeply involve themselves in their characters. Fortunately, few of the performers I have judged had latched on to the Commedia approach or had managed to perfect their "acts." Had they done so it would have given them a distinct advantage over a completely improvised performance, and certainly would have made judging more difficult. Since the nature of the im-

provised duet event will ultimately be determined by the kinds of performances which judges reward with first division ratings, it is hoped the majority of judges in the state will be aware of prepared material which the performers use and be very critical of it.

The elements of dramatic structure are every bit as important in the improvised scene as they are in the scripted scene. Many of these elements will always be present regardless of choices made by the performers, but if they are the product of conscious control in the scene, the performance itself becomes stronger. Two significant areas of concern in respect to dramatic structure which should be considered in depth I call "scene dynamics" and "scene integrity."

In the case of the improvised duet event the improvisation is the performance. And as such it is almost imperative that it be a complete dramatic action. The key idea is "completion," which implies the creation of "a unified whole," as opposed to "conclusion" or "ending," which imply simple termination whether "the whole" is completed or not. A dramatic action has been described as including an announcement of a conflict or establishment of two forces in opposition, the intensification of that conflict, the peaking or climaxing of the opposition, and the resolution of the conflict.

Some may feel that conflict is not necessary--the famous Carl Reiner-Mel Brooks "Two-Thousand Year-Old Man," for example. If this example must be admitted as a dramatic action, conflict remains subordinated to the stand-up comic posture which relies upon gag lines for viability. One might also question whether such "interview" premises serve the objectives of the improvised duet event, especially since a single premise could fit nearly any topic with only slight modification. The point to keep in mind when discussing conflict, however, is that it need not be between two characters: it can be the characters' reason versus their own desires (as in a "weight-watchers" scene); it can be the characters against the environment (as in a "top of the mountain" presentation); or it may be a conflict of abstractions (such as many clowns use in an ignorance-versus-knowledge act). All that is needed is some suspense or tension, some unanswered question for the audience which is ultimately answered in the conclusion, a "Who will win" question. This question should arise from the situation itself; in too many cases the question exists external to the action, such as "How are they going to keep

this scene going long enough?" or "How are they going to incorporate the topic?"

In perhaps half the improvised duet performances that I judged, there was a significant problem with these "scene dynamics," and in nearly all cases the smoothest and most enjoyable performances were those in which the performers were acutely responsive to the dynamics of the action. The contention in this paper is that planning and prepared work should be discouraged as much as possible, but due to the time limitations for the performance, it is admittedly beneficial for the performers to know where they are going. This means they should know before performing what point "A" (the conflict), point "B" (the climax), and point "C" (the resolution) will be. Given unlimited time, they might not need prior understanding of any more than point "A", the conflict, but even veteran improvisers sometimes take as long as fifteen minutes or more to reach an effective point "B" when time is unlimited. They are frequently obliged to establish other points "A" along the way until one of them finally provides a dramatic potential that satisfies the performers.

A common fault with the high school contestants is to be aware of all points but spring point "B" before the conflict has peaked. Some performers tend to build nicely until they see the five-minute time card, then they jump immediately to the climax and resolution, and they conclude before the three-minute card goes up. This is comparable to jumping from the first to the last act in a play and makes the ending look like a hat trick.

Pre-determination of the elements of the dramatic action can work very effectively in the improvised duet. For example, the topic selected might be something like "on the road," and the two performers, after free-associating and bouncing around some ideas, may come up with a male-female, hitchhiker-woman driver premise. If the scene is to be serious, point "A" might be the seemingly innocuous hiker being offered a lift by a jilted young woman. Point "B" might be a hold-up at knife-point, and point "C" could be the injuring of the driver. Or if the scene is to be humorous, point "A" might be an escaped con forcing his way into a car driven by a dizzy little old lady who drives like a maniac. Point "B" could be an accident, and point "C" the arrest of both of them. In this hypothetical situation there is great potential for building up conflict, developing characters and relationships, and improvising imaginative dialogue and

action. The planning is minimal, amounting to a very rudimentary scenario. Such minimal planning relieves the pressure on the performers to "read out" the destiny of the scene, permitting them to concentrate on more carefully shaping that destiny.

One final point concerning scene dynamics: stick to the conflict. One trick of performers who have pet "lazzi" is to deviate from the line of dramatic action to create an environment or opportunity for their prepared material. Deviations from the principal line of action are not objectionable so long as they lead back into it, and so long as the concern for the conflict intensifies as point "B" is approached.

The integrity of a scene is its adherence to its own internal logic. It is very tempting for performers to sacrifice this logic when they feel a scene going downhill, or when they simply see an opportunity to be more entertaining. It is not uncommon for deus ex machina, or a "hat trick," to suddenly occur to salvage the moment, for four-year-old and eighty-year-old characters to suddenly become sixteen in terms of awareness and knowledge or physical capabilities, or for new information to be suddenly introduced which alters the perspective on previous information. In such a case the logical fabric of the scene is established and then something is introduced which rends it. In a play or narrative fiction the audience expects certain "contracts" to be fulfilled; the same is true for the improvised scene. The expectations of the audience, shaped by the performers, constitutes a contract, but when the contract is broken by the performers, the audience tends to feel cheated. This failure to fulfil the contract is not the same as a "surprise ending" or an unexpected plot twist which is properly prepared. There is a fine line of difference. In literature the transparent plot contrivance is viewed as a cheap trick and in the improvised scene it is really little more than a bail-out. It simply implies the inability of the performers to reach a logical and harmonious completion of the dramatic action.

Yet there remains the question of how to salvage a scene in trouble. Perhaps the scenario isn't working; the performers are unable to get a good grip on their characters; the scene is walking but not running or flying. What can the performers do? They can't ask to begin again. They can't just give up the scene. Should they simply hold their noses and resign themselves to going down with the sinking performance? For such a situation there is no good answer. My feeling is that the performers should really struggle to dance with the partner they came with, perhaps

even abandoning the planned scenario in favor of something stronger that arises during the performance. The important thing needed to bring the scene to a conclusion is a viable conflict that can be brought to a climax and resolution. In an extreme case, a "hat trick" might be used, but permitting it can mean encouraging its unnecessary use. In any case characters should never be abandoned or sacrificed. In judging such performances, I tend to lean toward evaluating the fundamental skill of the performers, and there is a definite thrill for me to see performers salvage a scene in trouble without a "hat trick."

Scene dynamics and scene integrity should be the principal considerations in evaluating the performance. But more subtle aspects of the performance should also be considered: the development of information, the pantomime skills, and the balance between performers. How is new information handled? Does the new information move the scene forward, or sabotage it? Do the characters respond to the new information as they reasonably might? Do characters and relationships between characters become more complete as more information is developed and more circumstances are met? How well do the performers visualize the environment? How is the stage space used? Are walls and imaginary objects violated? How are pantomimed objects handled? Do they have substance? Do they disappear and reappear? Have the performers made such choices about the environment as the weather and the time? Do the performers contribute equally to the scene, or is one the performer and the other a "prop?" Do both performers share the development of the scene, or does one move the scene forward and the other simply follow? All these factors, which, when well done, demonstrate highly desirable skills and awareness in the performer of both improvised and scripted work, and cannot be fully evaluated if the performers are doing prepared bits.

The critical framework outlined above combines the best of both worlds. It provides for an improved "end" through improvisation, while promoting the development of various performing skills through the "means" of improvisation. If a disproportionate emphasis is placed on either the ends or the means, educational benefits will surely be lessened. A balance between the two enables us to give up the "win at any cost" maxim for the more important "win at any profit" idea. There should be no "cost" in winning, and the one who profits most merits the award.

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The task of coaching performers is not easy, and it is even more difficult when the coach has little background in improvisational techniques. Some coaches find it understandbly easier to encourage students to simply "learn from each other" and develop their own methods of preparation. Certainly such an approach has a valid educational payoff, but a planned program of developing improvisational skills can increase that payoff. In teaching acting and improvisation courses at the college level I have found that a structured program of improvisational development generally produces results superior to those by even the most talented students who have not had that training. Such training also permits a substantial degree of interchangeability among duet partners, a real test of performer skill. While many coaches do not enjoy the resources needed to fully implement an intensive structured program, it would seem desirable to give as much structured help and guidance as possible.

Two basic references on improvisation are Viola Spolin's Improvisation For the Theatre and Robert Passoli's Book on the Open Theatre.[2] The Spolin book is a compendium of exercises geared for the development of improvisational skills, such as characterization, development of new information and circumstances, and other scene dynamics. The Passeli book includes exercises used by the Open Theatre, and is valuable for its approach to skills of a more abstract nature, such as inventiveness and the spontaneous creative response. A more traditional use of improvisation in actor training is explained in Jerome Rockwood's Craftsmen of Dionysus and a number of other acting and directing texts.[3] Few coaches will be able to fully utilize much of what is included in these sources, but they should familiarize themselves with them.

In addition to these sources, here are a few more specific recommendations I have found helpful. While my work has been at the college level, these suggestions may prove useful to the secondary school coach.

Premises: Work extensively with new premises and as a general rule never repeat a premise. Work from broad topics only occasionally, perhaps right before tournament time, and in classroom exercises keep the premises relatively specific to prevent locking in on stock characters and material. One good approach is to stay at the "who, what, where" level, specifying two of the three and permitting the performers to make a choice concerning the third. Do some work with "hidden" premises, giving each performer some objective or information unknown to

the other performer. Ideally, such objectives should be in conflict and each performer warned that he has no alternatives but to accept such a conflict. For instance, two roommates might each be told separately that he or she is to get the other out of the house by 7:00 tonight because an important date is to be entertained. Work for the serious piece as frequently as the humorous one, and make a big poster for the preparation room reading: "Funnier Is Not Better." A good exercise is to require the potentially humorous premise to be performed seriously, and vice-versa. For sources of premises one might consult play catalogues and the TV Guide.

Time: Don't allow too much preparation time. For practice exercises, ninety seconds is enough if the scene dynamics are not planned. "Who are you and who am I? Where are we? What are we doing?" That's all that's necessary to begin. Such limited planning forces performers to become more acutely sensitive to the cues they get from each other during the scene. Gradually more planning time, broader premises, and more choices can be permitted. But the preparation time should never be longer than fifteen or twenty minutes, and no "dry runs" should ever be allowed, since they tend to be more limiting than helpful for inventiveness in the performance. In a complete preparation, besides establishing an acceptable premise within the topic and making choices concerning scene dynamics and environment, the performers should spend some time in a long "off-stage beat," walking and moving in character and disciplining their concentration.

Characters: Don't permit students to lock themselves into a couple of character types. Use stereotypes but always try to find the source of the behavior. Avoid crossing sexual roles. Some performers attempt it, but except in the most stylized characterization, few high school performers can believably portray a member of the opposite sex. The use of non-human roles is certainly permissible, but imagination and inventiveness in creating the role are key factors. A tree or a bug that is little different from an American adolescent leaves much to be desired. Judges may also differ on how they reward cuteness or quaintness which is without imaginative characterization to support it.

Concentration: The single most important factor in preserving the integrity of a scene is concentration. Concentration and circle of attention exercises in Spolin, Passoli and An Actor

Prepares are helpful.[4] The performer must discipline his concentration so that he can focus very narrowly on what he is doing, eliminating the distractions of audience reaction, the judge, and his own tensions. It is helpful to demand that the performers take an "off-stage beat" to focus energy and concentration on character and circumstances. It is even wise to take a five-second "beat" between the introduction and performance to shift gears and re-focus concentration.

Finally, preparation for an improvisational event, as many coaches have probably learned by now, is not a thing that can be hurried. The performers must train and work extensively together, perhaps more than for any other event. The skills needed for reacting quickly, spontaneously, and dramatically, in character, to the developing living moment, the outcome of which is little more predictable than in real life, are quite complex. They need time to grow and flower.

There is a lot of merit in encouraging improvisational work at the high school level. Unless it is permitted to be truly spontaneous and improvised, it has limited value. But properly handled it "opens up" many students by developing stage presence and performing confidence, encouraging freer and more natural performing styles, and leads to more inventive and fuller characterizations, improves understanding of dramatic structure, and helps develop imagination and creativity. Improvised duet acting is now a part of the state festivals and has proven itself successful as a festival event. Perhaps, with refinement, it can achieve its potential as an educational experience as well.

NOTES

[1]This idea of the "contract" I owe to John Ciardi in a 1972 lecture on poetry at the University of Kansas. There may be other sources.

[2]Viola Spolin, Improvisation for the Theatre: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1963).

[2]Robert Passoli, Book On the Open Theatre (New York: Bobbs-Merrill).

[3]Jerome Rockwood, Craftsmen of Dionysus (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1966).

[4]Konstantin Stanislavsky, An Actor Prepares (New York: Theatre Arts).